

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
NEWS ANALYSIS 1-0587
SEAN KELLY/PENTAGON

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B-ONE BOMBER CONTROVERSY

ANNCR:

THE SUPERSONIC B-ONE BOMBER IS NOW EMERGING AS A FOCAL POINT IN THE CURRENT POLITICAL DEBATE OVER MILITARY SPENDING. VOA PENTAGON CORRESPONDENT SEAN KELLY EXAMINES THE ARGUMENTS ON BOTH SIDES.

VOICE:

THERE ARE THOSE WHO LOVE THE B-ONE. THEY ARGUE THAT IT IS CLEARLY THE ANSWER TO AMERICA'S STRATEGIC BOMBER REQUIREMENT, ONE THAT WILL SERVE THIS NATION WELL INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY. BUT THERE ARE ALSO THOSE WHO QUESTION WHETHER THE UNITED STATES REALLY NEEDS TO SPEND TWENTY THOUSAND MILLION DOLLARS ON A MILITARY AIRCRAFT THEY SAY IS OBSOLETE EVEN BEFORE IT ENTERS ACTIVE SERVICE. THAT SORT OF MONEY, IN THEIR VIEW, COULD BE BETTER SPENT ON PROJECTS MORE DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE NEEDS OF THE AVERAGE CITIZEN. THE ISSUE IS NOW BEFORE THE CONGRESS.

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES HAS ALREADY APPROVED PRODUCTION FUNDS FOR THE B-ONE. SO HAS THE INFLUENTIAL SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE. THE FULL SENATE DEBATE WILL BEGIN WHEN THE LEGISLATURE RETURNS FROM ITS CURRENT EASTER RECESS.

THE VIEW HERE AT THE PENTAGON IS THAT THE MANNED BOMBER FORMS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF WHAT STRATEGIC PLANNERS CALL THE TRIAD, A THREE PRONGED DEFENSIVE FORCE CONSIDERED ESSENTIAL TO THE DETERRENCE OF NUCLEAR WAR. THE TRIAD CONSISTS OF LAND BASED INTERCONTINENTAL BALLISTIC MISSILES, SUBMARINE LAUNCHED BALLISTIC MISSILES AND THE LONG RANGE BOMBER. TAKE ONE

COMPONENT AWAY FROM THE TRIAD AND THE REMAINING TWO BECOME VULNERABLE.

PENTAGON OFFICIALS SAY THAT THE EXISTING BOMBER FORCE IS ALREADY VULNERABLE. IT IS MADE UP OF AGING B-FIFTY-TWO BOMBERS MANY OF WHICH HAVE BEEN ON ACTIVE DUTY FOR NEARLY TWO DECADES. THE ARGUMENT HERE GOES THAT EVEN WITH SUBSTANTIAL IMPROVEMENTS, THE B-FIFTY-TWO IS BASED ON AN OUT OF DATE CONCEPT AND IT OUGHT TO BE REPLACED BEFORE IT BECOMES UNSAFE TO FLY. THE QUESTION IS SHOULD IT BE REPLACED WITH ANOTHER OF MAN'S BOMBERS OR COULD MISSILES DO THE JOB?

(OPT) IT IS CLEAR THAT THE AIRFORCE FAVORS THE B-ONE, A CONTINUATION OF THE MANNED BOMBER CONCEPT. TWO OF THE AIRCRAFT ARE NOW BEING FLIGHT TESTED IN CALIFORNIA. ONE WAS FLOWN THURSDAY BY SENATOR BARRY GOLDWATER, A RETIRED AIRFORCE GENERAL AND A RANKING MEMBER OF THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE. ON MONDAY, SECRETARY OF DEFENSE DONALD RUMSFELD JOURNEYS TO CALIFORNIA TO FLY IN THE B-ONE. SELDOM HAS A NEW WEAPON SYSTEM RECEIVED SUCH HIGH LEVEL ATTENTION.

THE REASONS BEHIND THIS PROMOTIONAL EFFORT ARE CLEAR. (END OPT) THERE ARE POWERFUL ARGUMENTS BEING MARTIALED AGAINST THE B-ONE. PERHAPS THE MOST DETAILED OF THESE WAS CONTAINED IN A REPORT ISSUED EARLIER THIS YEAR BY THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, A NON-GOVERNMENTAL RESEARCH ORGANIZATION HERE IN WASHINGTON. THE BROOKINGS STUDY CLAIMS THAT THE B-ONE IS AN INEFFICIENT WAY TO MODERNIZE THE U.S. STRATEGIC BOMBER FORCE. IT ARGUES INSTEAD FOR WHAT IT CALLS A STANDOFF BOMBER WHICH COULD BE A LARGE WIDE-BODIED JET SUCH AS A BOEING SEVEN-FORTY-SEVEN ARMED WITH LONG RANGE MISSILES.

SUCH A PROJECT SAYS THE BROOKINGS REPORT COULD BE MUCH MORE EFFECTIVE THAN THE B-ONE CONCEPT AND IT COULD SAVE THE U.S. AS MUCH AS FIFTEEN THOUSAND MILLION DOLLARS OVER THE NEXT TEN YEARS.

NOT TRUE, SAYS THE AIRFORCE, USING ITS OWN SET OF FIGURES AND CLAIMING THAT THE COST FOR THE B-ONE AND THE PROPOSED STANDOFF BOMBER WOULD BE ROUGHLY COMPARABLE. AIRFORCE SECRETARY THOMAS REED, THIS WEEK, DISPUTED THE BROOKINGS ASSESSMENT ADDING THE B-ONE IS THE RIGHT SOLUTION IN TERMS OF COSTS, IN TERMS OF EFFECTIVENESS AGAINST SOPHISTICATED DEFENSES AND IN TERMS OF FLEXIBILITY.

JUST WHICH SIDE WILL PREVAIL IN THIS CONTROVERSY REMAINS TO BE SEEN. BUT SO FAR IN THE CONGRESS, THE VOTE SEEMS TO BE IN FAVOR OF THE B-ONE.

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JS/CAK